# Xavier Güell
# I, Gaudí

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The Mystical in Art, the Mystical in Life, the Mystical in Nature – this is what I am looking for. It is absolutely necessary for me to find it somewhere.

*De profundis,* Oscar Wilde*

* *De profundis*, Oscar Wilde, The Knickerbocker Press, 1905

The 12th of June 1926 is a special day for Barcelona. The city wakes wondering for whom the bells are tolling. Finally, everyone comes to learn they are tolling for Gaudí, who will be buried that afternoon. Remarks on the circumstances of his death, which has caused so much ink to flow onto the pages of newspapers in the last forty-eight hours, intermingle with the people's grief as they move through the city. They endure the stifling sun dressed in their mourning clothes of black, all heading towards the wake that has been set up at the Santa Creu Hospital. The burial is expected to be quite an event. (In those days, important funerals never lacked a ceremonial touch.)

Far from this hustle and bustle, in the silence of the hospital's chapel, lies the embalmed body of Gaudí, covered by a black shroud, the left hand clutching a rosary as it rests on his lifeless chest. It looks as if he's sleeping. The many Barcelonans who go to see him confirm that there, in that moment, in that place, everything Gaudí considered fundamental in life is revealed: his serene integrity in the face of pain, his unalterable astonishment at the joy of artistic creation. Yes, indeed, there, in the chapel, it is as if he has accomplished the greatest ambition he could have desired: not worldly honour or triumph, rather the act of becoming forever part of an inherent reality; like the earth, like the trees.

At the beginning of the afternoon a carriage with glass panels, pulled by horses with crapes and a coachman dressed in an elegant suit with a top hat, enters the hospital courtyard. The

time appointed for the funeral preparations has arrived. Two strong pallbearers, who let off a stench of benzoin tincture, lift the modest oak coffin that holds Gaudí's body into the carriage; over it they drape a mortuary cloth, purple in colour and embroidered with a phoenix bird, an offering from the Architects' Association of Catalonia. Then, they busy themselves with arranging some flower wreaths that somebody has left there.

'No! Don't do that!' a member of the wake exclaims as he crosses the courtyard breathlessly. 'He didn't want wreaths. We must respect his wishes,' he adds, to soften his commanding tone.

Little by little the courtyard begins to fill with people; eventually, the authorities who are going to lead the march also arrive. A multitude that is only growing in number, contained by the local police, presses against the other side of the gates. Voices of protest are heard. Finally, the clock strikes five-thirty, and a little later than planned, the hospital gates open onto Carrer del Carme. The funeral cortège starts to move in the direction of La Rambla. In a couple of long strides, a man dressed in military uniform slips in to join the front of the procession. The high-ranking military man apologises to the rest of the authorities, explaining that there has been some tension in the flag room, where a possible coup d'état was being discussed. (Eventually, one would take place on the 24th of June, the day of Sant Joan.)

The carriage positions itself on the central pavement of La Rambla, facing in the direction of the sea, and advances towards Carrer Ferran, people crowding around both sides. Some eyes are filled with curiosity, others pure sorrow. All are shaded by the plane trees. At the slow pace of the horses, the wake passes in front of the Palau de la Virreina and arrives in front of the Mercat de la Boqueria. There, some employees from the nearby shops watch in their work aprons, having just realised what is happening.

'It's Gaudí!' cries out an elderly man, tall, all skin and bones, with a strong Roman nose. He's clearly touched by the opportunity to pay his respects to the creator of the Sagrada Família.

'Is it really him?' asks one of the distracted shopkeepers, who appears to have come from a nearby lottery stand, a last-minute mourner who has removed his beret and stuffed it in the pocket of his apron.

'Do you not like his work?' the elderly gentleman inquires, used to dealing with individuals who are critical of Gaudí's innovative art.

'No, no. I like it very much. He's our best architect!'

The old man nods, but he's in a rush and doesn't want the conversation to go on for longer than necessary. He's not going to be able to escape so easily, though. The man from the lottery stand persists, 'But who are those people, the ones that are part of the funeral procession?'

'Ah! Those first in line are guards, there to ensure the clearance of the street, and what you can see over there is the flag of the Spiritual Association of Devotees of St. Joseph – very influential in terms of anything to do with the construction of the Sagrada Família. Those over there are students from the School of Architecture, and the others are members of various Barcelonan artistic societies: the Orfeó Català, the Ateneu Barcelonès, the Cercle Artístic de Sant Lluc. Look, over there is Josep Maria Jujol, Gaudí's disciple. Have you heard of him? Some say he's going to be the successor on the Sagrada Família. He's a fantastic architect too. And next to him is a young lad with a troubled look about him. Yes, that one, do you see him? That's Doctor Alfonso Trías, Gaudí's neighbour in Park Güell.'

'And those over there, with a distinguished air?' the employee of the lottery stand asks.

'The authorities! I recognise the mayor, the Baron of Viver, and the new Bishop of Barcelona, Monsignor Josep Miralles. I do not, however, know who the soldier next to them is; he seems nervous.'

'But what are all of that lot doing if it's not an official burial?'

'The truth is, I'm not sure,' the elderly, Roman-nosed man replies dryly, before leaving in the direction of the Santa Maria del Pi church.

The cortège advances slowly. As it enters Plaça de Sant Jaume, the clock reads half past five. Then, with some difficulty, the procession makes its way down Carrer del Bisbe in the direction of the cathedral.

The bells begin to toll. Hundreds of people trip over each other on the narrow Carrer del Bisbe, still without the famous bridge that would connect the Palau de la Generalitat with the Casa dels Canonges. (They would construct it in 1928.) Everybody wants to be present for the farewell: it is a sorrowful goodbye to a well-loved citizen. How many mysteries the human soul contains! Gaudí has died; this is now undeniable. And the air fills with murmurs whilst the birds, jubilant, join in with the ringing of the bells. The legend surrounding Gaudí's death grows with every minute that passes. At a quarter to six, the cortège finally stops before the Santa Llúcia doors. The students from the School of Architecture walk the coffin into the cathedral. All of the church incumbents are there, strutting about triumphantly, brandishing the emblems of their respective ecclesiastical charges. Gaudí must be exalted as a Christian, although many of his Freemason friends also speak of the need to delve deeper into the esoteric aspects of his personality.

Gaudí: Catholic, Freemason, nationalist, republican. These details bother some people. Today is no exception. But the ritual continues. Some journalists, easily recognisable thanks to the notebooks in their hands, write down all the details that will later be revealed in the society pages. (Thanks to them, we know what happened, with various degrees of accuracy, depending on the newspaper they worked for. Some were very exacting, like *La Vanguardia*, who sent a photographer to take several shots of the procession.)

The voices of the choir are already sounding out from inside the cathedral, harmonising *Libera me, Domine* by Gargallo. The maestro Sancho Marracó, unprepared to let a single note slip out of place at this particularly solemn moment, conducts them with a firm hand. Everything for Gaudí. "Grant him eternal rest O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon him." The students advance to the centre of the cross and rest the coffin on a bier prepared for the purpose. How impressive death seems now in all its glory! Canon Bruguera is responsible for officiating the ceremony. The congregation crowded in the central nave hums with expectation. The chapels off to the sides have been opened for the occasion too. It's a splendid afternoon for contemplating the afterlife, and even (why not?) the Final Judgement. The people heed the impulses of their hearts more than the words of the canon, though all unite in the responsorial chant of *Qui Lazarum*. The funeral rites of the Catholic church have been performed in their entirety. The time is quarter past six. It is time to leave.

'Come on, come on!' shouts a member of the cortège. He's the same man who stopped the pallbearers placing the flower wreaths in the carriage, and seems to be overseeing the whole operation. After a short conversation with the students, who are required to move the coffin once again, this time back out of the cathedral, he continues, 'Time is getting ahead of us,' he announces in the manner of someone who is well versed in these situations. 'We must stick to the timings! The people waiting out on the street deserve our respect. There is no reason for us to prolong the event.'

The bells toll once again. The authorities exit silently and the cortège advances along Avinguda del Portal de l'Àngel in the direction of Plaça de Catalunya, passing in front of the works on the Can Jorba building. (The building would be inaugurated that October.) As the cortège reaches Carrer Casp, it is met by a crowd that offers a very different image to that at the funeral. This crowd has gathered to pay tribute to a committed

man, a determined Catalanist, a man who fought against the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and in defence of Catalan soil. Everything is a political declaration. This was to be expected. In order to verify it, the journalists who are still in the thick of the crowd ask here, there, and everywhere and receive the same response each time: Gaudí is a universal Catalan. Amongst those who've recently arrived, it's easy to spot the members of Catalanist movements thanks to their comments and the way in which they hail the passing of the coffin. The carriage arrives in front of the Jesuit convent, where the bells ring in honour of Gaudí to murmurs of approval. From the top of number 48 on Carrer Casp, an immense black ribbon covers the façade of Casa Calvet, one of the many buildings raised by the great architect to embellish the city. At this moment, the man leading the cortège can be seen smiling, though just for a moment, because of course he is well aware that they're going to arrive rather behind schedule for the congregation on the esplanade of the Sagrada Família.

An entire history is woven on that Barcelona evening: the recognition of a man destined for glory. Nobody can deny this on contemplating the crowd that follows the procession. When the carriage turns onto Carrer de València to head up Carrer Sicília towards the Sagrada Família, the sheer human mass following the procession becomes apparent. This evening, Gaudí is in the heart of every person, and from this moment on, he will remain embedded in the soul of Barcelona forever. (That day the air was thick with devotion for the man whose funeral rites were being honoured, the same man who today has achieved a commercial privilege enjoyed only by history's chosen few. Barcelona is a vast revolving warehouse, with fragments of Gaudí's works scattered everywhere.)

At seven in the evening, the carriage carrying Gaudí's remains finally arrives at the esplanade of the Sagrada Família. An approximate calculation by the press speaks of more than five thousand people. Gaudí is in his final resting place, the temple

he had wanted to make his masterpiece. Here too, the bells toll for him. The people embrace the moment. "God gave him to us, God has taken him away; we did not deserve him but we love his work. We are all, in some sense, a result of him." The coffin-bearers struggle to reach the doors in the chaos. In Gaudí's sacrificial temple, the chant unites all of his admirers, be they Catholics or Freemasons. "Brother Gaudí, pray for us!"

The first to enter are the associates of the Spiritual League of Our Lady of Montserrat, chanting liturgical psalms; behind them follow the workers of the Sagrada Família, bearing lit torches, followed by the clergy and then a motley crew of curious people. Too many people, too much dissonance, too much drama. On one side of the grand altar the Orfeó Català have been waiting for at least an hour. They're the choir of men and boys charged with singing the funeral oration as soon as the coffin enters. But the entrance of the coffin has been delayed. The atmosphere is tense and those in charge exchange glances. Finally they're able to clear a corridor through which the Sagrada Família workers can carry the coffin to the catafalque.

*Libera me…*

The choir begins the responsorial chant of the *Officium Defunctorum* by Tomás Luis de Victoria. "Free me, O Lord, from eternal death, when the heavens and the earth shake…"

'And now what will happen?' asks one of the members of the congregation when the choir finishes the response.

'Well, they'll take the coffin of the deceased to the crypt where he'll be buried,' responds another, eyes brimming with emotion.

This is exactly what happens. Without excessive ritual, the coffin is placed in the first niche to be found on the stairs, the one with a cornice with the image of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The niche will then be sealed, and a rosary recited for Gaudí's soul.

It is nine o'clock on the evening of the 12th of June 1926. All is calm. Only a few whispered remarks can be heard about

what a special day it's been for the city of Barcelona. Contrary to what the events of the day have suggested, Gaudí is in fact a figure whose heart can still be found everywhere: he belongs to everyone and to no one at the same time. He belongs to himself, to what he wanted to be in his life as an architect and as a human being.

It would continue to be said, more times than necessary, that one simply had to look at the interstices in Gaudí's works in order to find his personality. This is what Doctor Santaló thought. The doctor was one of Gaudí's closest friends and had accompanied him during some of his worst moments – he had not, however, been at his friend's side when he was on his death bed, for reasons that will soon become clear.

Some weeks after the burial, on the 3rd of July, Doctor Santaló is finally able to leave his home after a long illness that has left him first housebound and then confined to his surgery.

It is a very hot summer morning. The doctor needs to go to the Sagrada Família and decides to walk there. In his role as Gaudí's executor, he is responsible for gathering Gaudí's papers; at the moment they're strewn across his desk, just as he left them on the day he met his death. The air is suffocating and Santaló feels a sudden pressure on his chest. He stops next to a shop selling sports equipment, uses the wall to prop himself up, claws at his chest with his hand and closes his eyes. He can't shake the idea that Gaudí could have lived for many more years. The man was in good health; the best one could expect for an eccentric who submitted his body to a strict vegetarian diet. Santaló had taken care of him for more than thirty years: Gaudí took five-kilometre strolls every day, kept up the admirable custom of drinking water in abundance, had methodical habits, was strengthened by the medication that, after much insistence, the doctor had managed to persuade him to take; however, as of late, religious self-absorption had forged in him a total disregard for life. More than once, during the walks they had taken together, the doctor had the sensation that

Gaudí was closer to God than to the world around him. This led him to have trouble distinguishing the pavement from the avenue: on some occasions the doctor had to grab him before he walked into oncoming traffic.

Santaló is aware that Gaudí was a wandering soul, always an outsider, a guest at best; he also knows that his interior world was confronted by an exterior, hostile reality that he refused to accept. But what Santaló is not aware of are the circumstances leading up to Gaudí's death, nor whether his alienation had led him to think about bringing his end forward. With a great artist like him, so unpredictable, one can never be sure. Santaló brusquely moves his hand to brush away the idea that has not stopped haunting him ever since he was given the news of his death, but he can't stop his eyes from brimming with tears.

Santaló thinks of the thin line that separates life from death; of that brief moment in which reason, feelings, perception go from flowing freely to being suffocated in a dry blow. Were it not for the serious prostate operation that had kept him in hospital during those days, he is sure he would have been able to prevent Gaudí's fatal denouement. He can't get this out of his head, just as he can't stop thinking about not being able to be with Gaudí in his agony, or to attend his funeral, or even to be present at the reading of his will and testament. He's had to settle for a description of the events from all the friends who have come to visit him in the last few weeks. Little by little, the testimonials began to take on the shape of a real nightmare that repeats itself over and over.

Santaló sees Gaudí leaving the Sagrada Família at half past five in the evening to attend his daily mass at the Sant Felip Neri Church. He walks slowly and with the distracted air of someone more worried about the world within him than that around him. And, in this state, he crosses Gran Via at the Bailèn and Girona crossroads. Santaló watches as a number thirty tram mows Gaudí down. Then, as clear as day, he sees how the driver,

thinking the man is some drunken beggar, continues on his journey without stopping. The images become clearer then: Gaudí on his back, still conscious, looking up at the sky with peaceful eyes, almost grateful; Santaló can see him smiling, attempting to put his hand into the pocket of his trousers, held up with safety pins, to touch his Bible, and he believes that he can even hear the prolonged, uneven puff of Gaudí's breathing, which ends in a strangled gurgle; his heart is beating fast, but the blood doesn't reach his brain and eventually he fades away. Santaló's nightmare continues. He sees two pedestrians rush over to help the man: they don't recognise him and are unable to identify him due to his lack of documents; among his belongings they find only a handkerchief, a key, a handful of walnuts in his pockets and a little, bloody Bible that he holds in his right hand, next to his heart. They stop a taxi, then three more. No one wants to help. Why not? The man is just some poor devil who would dirty their upholstery. From a distance, Santaló sees a civil guard approaching and watches as he obliges one of the taxi drivers to take Gaudí to the dispensary on Sant Pere. Broken ribs, cerebral contusion, blunt trauma above the right ear. Anything else? They cannot say, but they have to move him. In the Santa Creu Hospital, he is confused once more with a beggar and assigned to a general ward.

The doctor finds all of this absurd, a typical example of the delirium that, once awake, one is aware is already over. At the same time, he fears it may conceal a terrible truth. In the space of a second, he realises the reality of his nightmare. With his eyes open, he cannot bring himself to believe it. He has to close them to feel the truth, impossible to deny.

The alarm was first sounded when Mosén Gil Parés announced that Gaudí had not returned to the Sagrada Família. Along with Domènec Sugrañes, a disciple of the architect, he went out to look for him on the usual route he used to return from his daily mass. There was no trace of him. They went to police stations, hospitals and clinics. The night already well

underway, they finally found him in the Santa Creu Hospital. He was unconscious, his face strangely illuminated, his lips black and his hand clutching a small, bloody Bible. The doctor told them he would not live for more than one or two more days.

The next morning, Gaudí regained consciousness and asked to receive his sacraments. At times he was calm and prayed; at others, he was gripped by a great agitation: he gesticulated and spluttered out incomprehensible words.

Santaló can also see Gaudí's friends entering the hospital: Bishop Miralles, Alfonso Trías, Puig i Cadafalch, Cambó, Rubió i Bellver, Jujol, the locksmith Mañach, the poet Melchor Font… All of them are there, all of them but him, bound to the bed of another hospital. The Baron of Viver, Mayor of Barcelona, offers to take Gaudí to a private clinic where he would receive better treatment. But Gaudí refuses. He wants to die as he has always lived, among humble people.

During the next two days he remains at peace; sometimes he sighs and, his hand anchored to his Bible, repeats, '*Jesús, Déu meu!*'

These are his last words.

After several weeks of humid heat, the sun's rays, pulsating with tiny particles, finally manage to break through the layer of clouds that shrouds the sky. The glimmer from the sea intermingles with the scent of the trees.

As he arrives at the Sagrada Família, Santaló goes the long way round to avoid bumping into Mosén Gil Parés and heads straight for Gaudí's studio. No one has entered since his death, as it was not permitted without the executor's consent. This is Santaló's privilege and his obligation.

The room is just as Gaudí left it on the day of the tragedy: unmade bed, rolls of paper, books, blueprints, models and photographs scattered around chaotically; replicas of human skeletons held together with wire hanging from hooks on the walls, along with life-sized plaster casts of animals, children, women and men, created to decorate the temple.

The doctor can't help but smile. His old friend never ceases to amaze him, even after death. He was not simply a genius; he was more than that: a cyclone, a giant, a force of nature capable of pushing his creative will to the very limit. Santaló takes a deep breath and sets about doing what he's there to do that morning: sort through the papers, gather those the notary has asked him to take to his office – any concerning matters relating to inheritance – and file away other notes and papers so they can be archived. He starts by organising the desk, which is overflowing with drawings, pieces of plaster, stones, wires, charcoals, coloured pencils; once it has been cleared, he places several folders on it and opens them to read their contents. These are Gaudí's things: his opinions on people, sketches, the occasional invoice. One line in particular catches Santaló's attention because it mentions the name Josep Maria Jujol, which is underlined with a thick red pencil: "Of all my disciples, Jujol is undoubtedly the most suitable to succeed me at the helm of the Sagrada Família, but despite having offered him the position, I have doubts about proposing his name to the Board. His manner, so specific to him, full of silences, as if he secretly believes he is better than everyone else, sometimes irritates me. Perhaps he does believe he is better than everyone else, and that frightens me, because he could change my plans for the construction of the temple. He has already done so with Casa Batlló and Milà; I allowed him to with these projects, but not my temple. Whom should I choose then? Rubió? Perhaps Sugrañes? Both could be safer options."

Santaló closes the folders and places them next to those that need to be filed away. He pauses for a moment, lost in thought. The truth is that everything has been put in order, it was an easy task. But then he remembers that Gaudí always liked mysteries; he was like a child in that respect. Could the desk have a hidden compartment? He pulls out the drawers and runs his hand along the grooves. In one of them, he feels something rough, something that could be a trapdoor. He presses it with

his fingers and a drawer opens on one of the sides. The desk does indeed have a secret compartment. In it is the original will and testament Gaudí wrote in Puigcerdà in 1911. Santaló reads it. It is the same one that, according to the news he's received from his friends, was made public a few days earlier at the notary's office. Gaudí bequeaths the house in Park Güell, as well as his savings and shares deposited in the Comillas family's Banco Hispano Colonial, to the Sagrada Família Construction Board. A codicil specifies the donation of two thousand pesetas to his disciple Josep Maria Jujol and various pieces of furniture, books and drawings to Alfonso Trías, the son of his neighbour in Park Güell. The doctor places the document alongside the papers he plans to take with him and slides his hand to the back of the drawer, where he finds a cardboard box tied with string. Inside are neatly folded letters tucked into open envelopes, numbered from one to twenty-one, with no name of sender or recipient. As he takes them out of the box to get a better look, a note, handwritten in blue ink, falls to the floor. It's easy to recognise Gaudí's handwriting. The note reads "Letters to Alfonso Trías."

As executor, Santaló assumes the right to read them. He does so slowly, deliberately.